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FOREIGN NEWS ON APPLES

SLACK BARRELS OF APPLES IN EXPORT MARKETS.

This is a subject worthy of the serious attention of every packer and shipper of barreled apples whose products find their way to overseas markets. "Slack barrels" may be listed as one of the greatest wastes connected with the export marketing of barreled apples. It is idle to speculate on how much the annual loss amounts to because each shipper who has reviewed his "European account" sales keenly appreciates the heavy discount suffered by the lower and often ruinous prices realized on barrels that arrived slack.

It is one of the greatest causes of grief in handling the barrel in export markets. To the buyer it indicates a weak parcel of fruit and possibly a careless packer; to the broker the slack barrel is an article that always causes difficulty in satisfying his American shipper and is a continuous subject of dispute on account of rejections by buyers; and to the shipper it is ever a matter of question, suspicion and disappointment.

What Is a Slack Barrel?

A slack barrel is one in which the apples do not come in contact with the head, and in which the apples are loose and subject to shifting about.

Under the term "slack" the apples may be 1/2" or 4" away from the head. When used in an unqualified manner in auction catalogues the buyer must have a close knowledge of the real character of the fruit if he is to bid intelligently on slack barrels and the salesman must also know the degree of slackness and condition of the fruit if he expects to protect his shipper and make full value in sale.

A slack barrel is customarily detected in the British markets by the brokers' "selectors", who are on the quay at the time the cargo is discharged, and it is done by tapping the barrel on its head with a hatchet. If the sound is hollow the barrel is placed in a lot designated as slack. When the tap of the hatchet makes a sound indicating contact of the barrel head with fruit, the barrel is considered "tight". In markets other than Liverpool the dock men may take greater or less pains to determine the slackness in barrels.

Some barrels listed as slack may be in very bad shape, either badly bruised and deteriorated or so slack as to greatly jeopardize their condition during further shipment. Others may be but slightly loose and represent as much actual apple value, as far as the real condition of the fruit is concerned, as the tight barrels in the same shipment.

On the Liverpool auction barreled apples are classified as (a) Tight (b) Slack (c) Slightly wet (d) Wet. Manchester has the same classification.

Glasgow classifies barreled apples (a) Tight (b) (c) Slack (d) Ex. Slack. Southampton does not classify the condition of the apples in the catalogues but requires the buyers to depend upon their own inspections and they indicate the condition of the fruit on the catalogue so as to buy intelligently.

It is interesting to note that the rules governing the classification are largely determined by the buyers in Liverpool while in Glasgow the brokers mostly dictate the character of classifying barrels. The classification in Liverpool is much more popular with buyers than that in Glasgow, the reasons as given being that "in Liverpool you can depend upon it's being tight or slack, as listed."

The matter of slackness is the one big reason for rejection at the quay after auction sale. It is possible that the popularity of Liverpool's classifications is partially due to fewer disputes over slack barrels.

So serious were the disputes over slackness in Spanish oranges that the Spanish shippers demanded a closer classification with the result that now all are considered "slack" and given a certain number of "chalks" on the catalogue, depending on the amount of decay. Thus in most British auctions, including Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Southampton oranges are classified as, I, II, III, X, and XX. In Hull IV and V are used instead of X and XX. Most of this classifying is determined by external appearance, although in the case of Jaffa oranges some brokers open every case.

Classification on the catalogues is not of serious moment providing the buyer and auctioneer have a close knowledge of the condition of all lots. But there is no question that both come to depend in a great measure upon the catalogue classifications and this places the hazard of faulty classification, directly upon the American shipper because the buyer is always present to reject in case he has bought "slacks" for "tights".

This situation is such as to cause the American shipper to look with favor upon those brokers whom the buyers consider technical because it indicates that such brokers are fighting for the shippers in the matter of "slacks" and "tights".

The Price Discount on Slack Barrels.

When apples are plentiful, sound and of moderate price (15 to 23 shillings) buyers will pay within a shilling or a shilling and ninepence for slack barrels as for tights. But when apples become weak so that re-shipping subjects them to the possibility of serious waste and shrinkage, or when they are scarce and high in price (35 to 45 shillings) the buyer is apt to discount slack barrels as much as three to five shillings per barrel. During November when apples should be at their prime, it is

common to see long lines of slacks sell at a discount of 1/6 and 2/-.

Many country buyers at points like Sheffield, Bradford, and Birmingham instruct their Liverpool representatives to buy only tight barrels. These buyers place the apples in their wholesale stores from which they will again ship to retail buyers in the surrounding small towns. They do not want anything to do with slack barrels at any price.

Aside from the injury inflicted upon apples by shaking around in slack barrels depreciation occurs through the "Facers" becoming disarranged and slightly bruised during shipment. While the retail fruiterer does not buy apples by looking at the "facers", he does form an impression as to the freshness and soundness of the lot by its general appearance. A barrel without its face in place and in good shape is given a discount at first glance.

This discrimination against "slacks" by the provincial trade is logical, well founded and real. The writer thoroughly satisfied himself on this point during his visits to these cities.

This discrimination, moreover, limits the outlet for the slack barrels to the vicinity of the port market. The restricted demand accounts for the lower prices on such apple even though the slackness be but slight and the condition of the fruit excellent.

What is the Cause of Slack Barrels?

The causes of slack barrels can be listed under poor or weak barrels; poor packing; rough handling in America; poor storing on board ship; rough handling by European stevedores; and weak or over-ripe fruit. Barrels with hoops that break or slip are certain to arrive slack.

Apples that are not properly shaken down during packing nor sufficiently pressed are subject to slackness. It has been observed that a higher percentage of slack barrels occurs where shredded paper has been used than where it is not used. Some growers have had their entire lot arrive slack while their neighbours fruit, arriving on the same ship, would be 100% tight.

Fruit arriving towards the end of December has a high percentage of slack barrels. After January 1st when most of the fruit has had its firmness conserved by cold storage an improvement is noted. It is due to the cold storage that York Imperials arriving in January have almost as many tight barrels as the average between November 15th and December 31st - as is shown in a table below. Not only does refrigeration conserve firmness but it so happens that only the fruit of the better packers is so stored.

Some cargoes arrive in very bad condition because of having been poorly stowed and jostled about while on the ocean. Occasionally sevedores allow barrels to roll and drop three or four feet at the ship's side,

placing a buffer on the quay to lessen the jar of landing. This is bad business when apples are weak and barrels are poor and should never be allowed. The Canadian Government has cargo inspectors to check-up on these practices where Canadian apples are concerned.

An analysis has been made of York Imperial apples arriving and catalogued in Liverpool between November 15th, 1923 and January 31, 1924, showing number and percentage of tight and slack barrels. The period was divided before and after January 1st, fruit of several individual packers was segregated and total arrivals were classified by 2 1/2" and 2 1/4" minimums. These dates follow:

SLACK BARRELS OF YORK IMPERIALS,
Liverpool, Season of 1923/4.

<u>Shipper A.</u>	<u>TIGHT</u>		<u>SLACK.</u>	
	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per cent.
Nov. 15th to Dec. 31st	607	85.1%	108	14.9%
Jan. 1st to 31st	142	73.2%	52	26.8%
<u>Shipper B.</u>				
Nov. 15th to Dec. 31st	3174	74.1%	1242	25.9%
Jan. 1st to 31st	2758	59.5%	1884	40.5%
<u>Shipper C.</u>				
Nov. 15th to Dec. 31st	533	51.4%	504	48.6%
Jan. 1st to 31st	420	75.1%	126	24.9%
<u>Miscellaneous Shippers.</u>				
Nov. 15th to Dec. 31st	15476	65.8%	8044	34.2%
Jan. 1st to 31st	9054	63.3%	5245	36.7%
<u>General Average, All Shippers.</u>				
Nov. 15th to Dec. 31st	20153	66.2%	10261	33.8%
Jan. 1st to 31st	12374	62.8%	7307	37.2%
<u>General Average, All Shippers.</u>				
2 1/2" minimum	8701	62.1%	5302	37.9%
2 1/4" "	23836	66.0%	12286	34.0%

It would not be fair to draw too many conclusions from these data. However they do show the variability of slack barrels with different

shippers and the tendency to have more slack barrels after January 1st (although these percentages are much lower than in common storage apples received during December). They also show that the larger sizes are more subject to going slack than the smaller ones.

Attention is called to Shipper B. His fruit out of cold storage shows 40.5% slack as against 37.2%, for the general average, although earlier in the shipping season he had only 25.9% slack as against 33.8% for the general average. The pack of Shipper B. has an excellent reputation on the market, brings top prices and is recognized as a consistently uniform pack. Yet his fruit shows slightly more slacks than the general average out of cold storage. Notwithstanding the fact that practically all of his cold storage stock was 2 1/2" minimum, it goes to show that the average pack going into cold storage ranks fairly high while the average pack shipped earlier in the season has far more slack barrels than it should and therefore is deserving of a lot more care in packing.

The Remedy for Slack Barrels.

Notwithstanding the fact that many American shippers feel that they have been dealt with unfairly when their account sales show a long list of slack barrels, with customary discounts, I have not been able to find anyone on the European side who is made joyous by the arrival of big catalogues of slack barrels. Such individuals may exist but they are not among the majority. Therefore not even the British buyers will be made unhappy if American growers take steps to reduce the number of slack barrels.

More care should be used in selecting sound barrels. The hoops are the important part of the barrel in causing slackness. The hoops on barrels used in Virginia require more secure nailing. Virginia barrels are the poorest that arrive on this market.

Many slacks plainly indicate that not enough apples were put in the barrel. Pressing alone will not do this. Especial care must be used in shaking down barrels in which shredded oiled paper is used. The paper is apt to cause bridging and slack barrels.

Refrigeration will keep the fruit firm and eliminate some slack barrels. Careful handling in transportation is important. Much rough handling could be eliminated by cargo inspectors in New York and in the principal ports of destination. Such inspectors play an important part in stimulating shipping companies to compete with one another in careful handling in order to get traffic.

EDWIN SMITH.

Specialist in Foreign Marketing.

